

HIGH HOLY DAY WORKSHOP – Elul and Selichot

5 Things to Know About Elul

Elul is the Hebrew month that precedes the High Holy Days

Some say that the Hebrew letters that comprise the word Elul – *aleph, lamed, vav, lamed* – are an acronym for “*Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*,” a verse from Song of Songs that means “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” Most often interpreted as love poetry between two people, the phrase also reflects the love between God and the Jewish people, especially at this season, as we assess our actions and behaviors during the past year and hope for blessings in the coming year.

Several customs during the month of Elul are designed to remind us of the liturgical season and help us prepare ourselves and our souls for the upcoming High Holidays.

1. BLOWING THE SHOFAR

Traditionally, the shofar is blown each morning (except on Shabbat) from the first day of Elul until the day before Rosh HaShanah. Its sound is intended to awaken the soul and kick start the spiritual accounting that happens throughout the month. In some congregations the shofar is sounded at the opening of each *Kabbalat Shabbat* service during Elul.

2. SAYING SPECIAL PRAYERS

Selichot (special penitential prayers) are recited during the month of Elul. A special *Selichot* service is conducted late in the evening – often by candlelight – on the Saturday night a week before Rosh HaShanah.

3. VISITING LOVED ONES' GRAVES

Elul is also a time of year during which Jews traditionally visit the graves of loved ones. This custom not only reminds us of the individuals on whose shoulders we now stand and helps us honor their memories, but also prompts us to think about our own lives and the legacies we will leave to others – kind words spoken, comfort offered, love given and received – which take on added meaning as we enter the High Holiday season.

4. READING PSALM 27

It is customary to read Psalm 27 each day from the beginning of Elul through Hoshana Rabbah, which is the last day of Sukkot.

5. REFLECTING

It also is a month during which we are encouraged to study and take time for personal reflection around our actions of the past year and to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged or with whom we otherwise have “missed the mark” in our interactions and behaviors. Many readily available resources can help you make this process interactive.

A DEEP DIVE INTO ELUL

Elul is the 6th month of the Biblical calendar (late summer/early fall), the month set apart for repentance, or teshuvah, in spiritual preparation for the High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur).

If you were to count from Tishri as the first month of the calendar (as the Rabbinic tradition does), Elul would be the last month of the year -- a time to make “New Year’s Resolutions” and to turn away from sin before the start of the New Year.

The month of Elul is therefore a time each year to prepare for the Days of Awe, by getting our spiritual house in order.

Background at Sinai

Every year the “Season of Teshuvah” runs forty days from the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul to Yom Kippur. During this time, we make every effort to repent, or “turn [shuv] toward God.”

In Jewish tradition, these 40 days are called *Yemei Ratzon* - “Days of Favor,” since it was during this time that God forgave the Jewish nation after the sin of the Golden Calf (Pirke d’Reb Eliezar).

Some have likened these 40 days to the number of weeks it takes for the human fetus to be formed within the womb. Teshuvah is a sort of death and rebirth: a death of the past life and the birth of a new one.

But why forty days? Do we really need that much time to prepare ourselves to repent and make confession for our sins? Jewish tradition determined that the forty days came from Israel's experience at Sinai. According to Rashi, Moses ascended Mount Sinai no less than three times for forty days and nights.

The first ascent began on the 6th of Sivan, 50 days after the Exodus, when Moses first received the Ten Commandments and began learning the details of the Torah (this corresponds to the holiday of Shavuot).

When he descended and saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf, however, he smashed the tablets (Exod. 32:19). According to tradition, this occurred on the 17th of Tammuz, a date later associated with calamity for Israel.

On the following day Moses burned the Golden Calf and judged the transgressors. He then went back up the mountain on the 19th of Tammuz and interceded on behalf of Israel for 40 more days (until the 29th of Av), though he descended the mountain without assurance.

God then called Moses the following day, on Elul 1, to ascend a third time to receive a new set of tablets. Forty more days and nights were spent receiving the revelation of Torah at Sinai. Moses finally descended on Tishri 10 - Yom Kippur - with the second set of tablets in hand and the assurance of God's forgiveness.

Psalm 27

It is a custom to sing or read the Book of Psalms during the month of Elul. In the famous Song of Moses, it is written "and they spoke, saying: 'I will sing to the LORD' (Exod. 15:1). This phrase can be formed into an acronym for Elul, and the sages therefore reasoned that hearing the Psalms were vital during the Season of Repentance and Days of Favor.

Of all the Psalms, however, Psalm 27 is considered central one of the season, however. The midrash on the Psalms states that the word **ori**, "my light," refers to Rosh Hashanah (based on Psalm 37:6) whereas the word **yishi** "my salvation," refers to the atonement given on Yom Kippur.

King David also mentions that God would hide him in his sukkah in the time of trouble, referring to the holiday of Sukkot (Psalm 27:5).

Since all three of these holidays are alluded to in this Psalm, Psalm 27 is regarded as the key Psalm for the Fall Holidays of the Jewish year.

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1)

Selichot Services

The Hebrew word *selichah* means “forgiveness.”

The plural form of the word selichah is selichot, a word traditionally used to refer to additional prayers for forgiveness recited during the month of Elul (through Yom Kippur).

These prayers and poems for mercy are usually recited before dawn, before the daily shacharit (morning) service (you can obtain a Selichot prayerbook at any good Jewish bookstore).

The list of the Thirteen Attributes of God's Mercy (Shelosh Esrei Middot shel Rachamim) are the primary focus of the prayers, based on the Talmud's statement that, "Whenever the nation of Israel sins, let them pray this prayer (i.e., the Thirteen Attributes) and I shall forgive them" (Rosh Hashanah 17b).

Merciful God, merciful God, powerful God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth. Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of iniquity, willful sin and error, and Who cleanses. (Exodus 34:6-7)

In general, Selichot services are intended to guide us toward an examination of our lives and to undergo teshuvah. In Sephardic tradition, Selichot services begin at the start of Elul and run until Yom Kippur (similar to the 40 days Moses spent on Mount Sinai), though in the Ashkenazic tradition they are recited late (i.e., midnight) on the Saturday night prior to Rosh Hashanah.

Some of the prayers and music for the Selichot service are taken from the services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, providing a transition between the "old year" and the New Year.

A Chassidic tradition holds that the last twelve days of the year (i.e., Elul 18 to 29) correspond to the twelve months of the closing year: on each of these twelve days, the penitent should review the deeds and achievements of its corresponding month.

What is Teshuvah?

The theme of the Jewish High Holidays is teshuvah a word often translated as "repentance," though it's more accurately understood as turning back (shuv) to God.

The root of this verb occurs nearly 1,000 times in the Tanach and first occurs when God told Adam he would "return to the earth" (Gen. 3:19). In spiritual terms, shuv may be regarded as both a turning away from evil and a turning toward the good, though Jewish thinking regards turning to God as the means by which we turn away from evil.

This act of turning has the power to redirect a person's destiny. It effects the whole life of the soul. As Abraham Heschel wrote, "No word is God's final word. Judgment, far from being absolute, is conditional. A change in man's conduct brings about a change in God's judgment" (Heschel: The Prophets, 194).

According to Jewish tradition, genuine teshuvah involves four basic steps:

Regret (charata)

Admit that you've committed wrong acts and feel remorse about your negative actions.

2. Abandonment (aziva)

Stop the negative actions immediately.

3. Confession (viddui)

Offer an apology to anyone you've harmed.

4. Resolve (kabalah)

Resolve to to never repeat the harmful action again. With this final act of commitment never to repeat the same mistake, you have come full circle. You have returned.